



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Women's Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom

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Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Nury Turkel, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you very much Chair Maenza. I would like to join in welcoming you all to today's hearing. As Chair Maenza has highlighted, women not only benefit greatly from international religious freedom standards and protections, but they also play a vital role in protecting those rights and advancing those norms.

Women's impact on religious freedom has been varied and wide-reaching. In countries like Pakistan and Russia, women demand the repeal of blasphemy and apostasy laws. In Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, women advocate for the legal right to interpret Islamic texts and traditions through their own gender-inclusive lens. In Sudan, women played an integral role in ending an authoritarian regime that placed significant restrictions on religious practice and discourse. In countries as diverse as Kenya, Syria, and Mali, women lead efforts to combat violent extremism, reduce hate, and foster interfaith tolerance through dialogue and social services, often at great personal risk.

Many of these efforts are global in scope. Around the world, many women work tirelessly for the protection of atheists, humanists, and nonbelievers from harm and discrimination, including women who are members of these communities. Women played a pivotal role in drafting and passing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which protects indigenous peoples' rights to practice and pass on their religious traditions and safely access sacred spaces and objects. Women have spearheaded efforts to combat antisemitism and anti-Muslim bias in Europe and elsewhere around the world. And women represent a cornerstone in efforts to protect the rights of LGBTI individuals to interpret and practice religion free from state repression.

Today, on International Women's Day, we celebrate these efforts by placing some of these women in the spotlight. While we cannot possibly cover all the ways women have been instrumental in protecting and promoting religious freedom globally, we are excited to at least scratch the surface and discern with our stellar panel of witnesses what we can learn from women's efforts and approaches to promote religious freedom around the world and how the U.S. government can better support these efforts.

I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Maenza to introduce our witnesses.